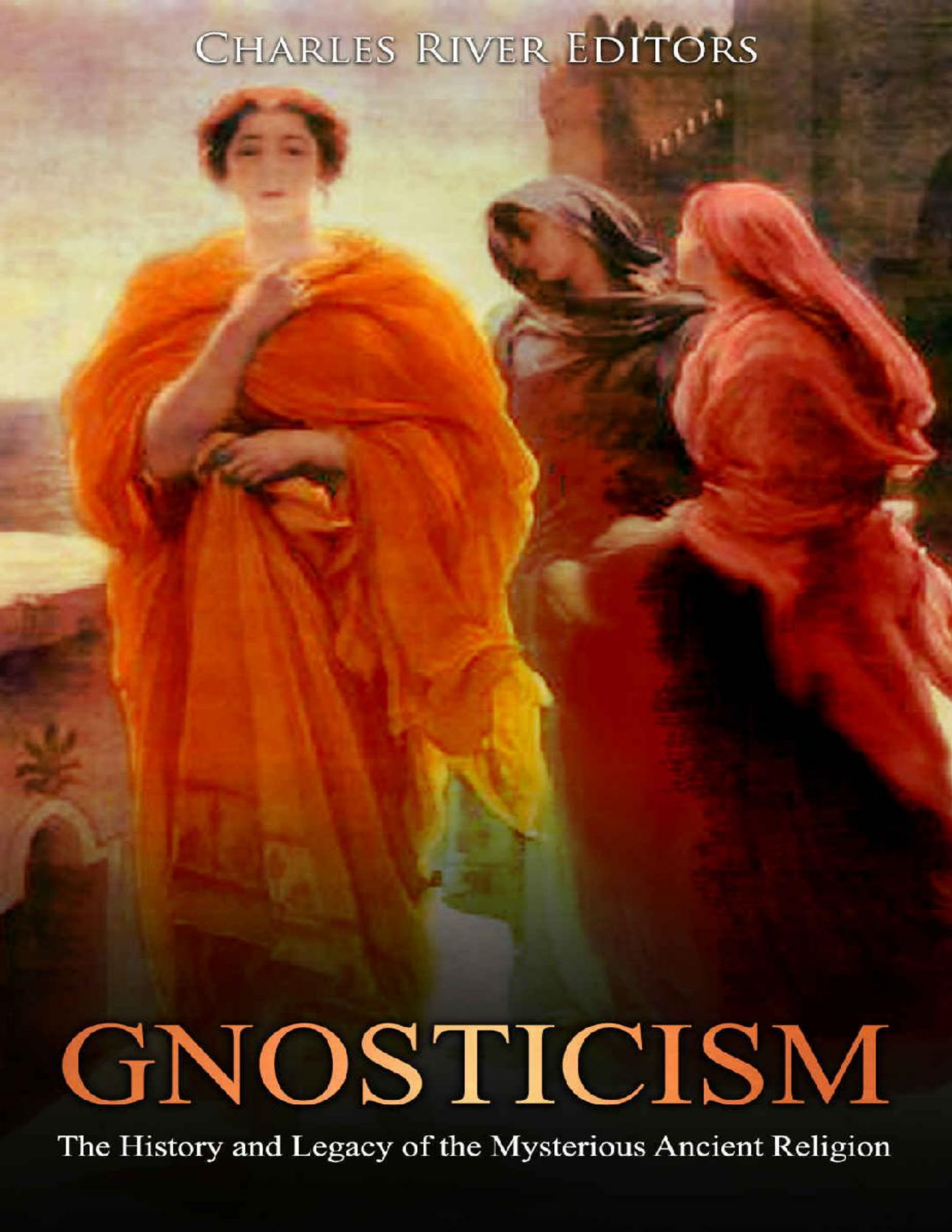
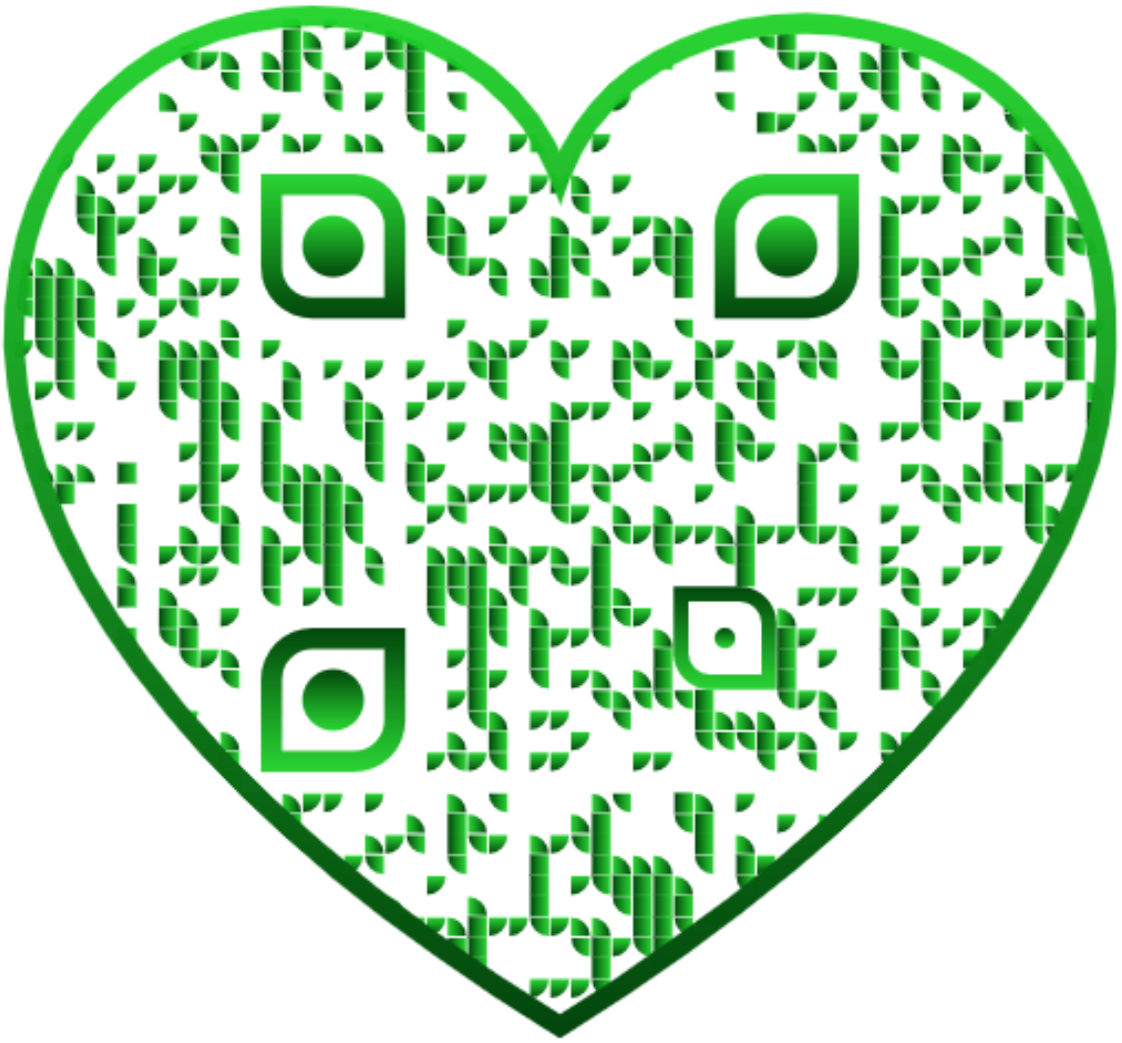

CHARLES RIVER EDITORS
GNOSTICISM
The History and Legacy of the Mysterious Ancient Religion



# Gnosticism: The History and Legacy of the Mysterious Ancient Religion

**By Charles River Editors**

**A depiction of the Abraxis Stone from *The Gnostics and their remains* by Charles W. King (1887)**

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# Introduction

# Gnosticism

**A lion-faced deity found on a Gnostic gem in Bernard de Montfaucon's *L'antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures,* believed to be a depiction of Yaldabaoth, the Demiurge**

"This knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself." - Plato

Many people interested in Biblical themes know about the Dead Sea Scrolls and their guardians, the mysterious Essenes, the sect of Judaism that hid its priceless library in caves before marching against the Romans in an end-time war, certain that God would intervene at the decisive moment. The ancient texts found in their rock cabinets have produced tons of literature. Fewer people know about an equally fascinating finding in the same region of the planet, made only a few months apart: a collection of hitherto unknown Christian codices, buried in the 4$^{th}$ century CE, and found accidentally by peasants near the city of Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt. Among the old codices

was *The Gospel of Thomas*, lost for 16 centuries, and other unfamiliar titles such as *The Gospel of Philip* and the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*.

In this case it was not Essenes who had entrusted them to the protection of the caves and the centuries, but monks who followed a now forgotten variant of Christianity called Gnosticism. Their philosophy promised them a better world than the one they were living in, which at that time was an Egypt occupied by Romans who were bleeding the country literally and figuratively. In doctrinal matters, they were under the authority of a distant patriarch ruling from his chair in Alexandria, who treated them with contempt. "They were the hippies of their day," said James Robinson, one of the greatest experts of the Nag Hammadi collection.

The monks were more interested in praxis than orthodoxy. For them, the important thing was asceticism, escaping this world. His philosophy denoted the God of the Old Testament as an evil, fraudulent, and weak being, whereas the serpent was the great Instructor, the true hero of the Genesis, the beast who made knowledge accessible to humans.

Gnosticism is one of the great mysteries in the history of Western religion. At its core is an ancient Greek word, gnōsis, a word prominent in the writings of Plato which refers to a deep personal knowledge or understanding that often transcends the physical world.[1] The Gnostics painted a picture of a fallen, broken world in which physicality was a product of a lesser deity. This deity was created in defiance of the One and in order to trap humans and blind them to the truths of their predicament and divine origins. By acquiring insight, or gnōsis, in this secret nature of the world, humans might escape their prison. Only through knowledge can people be set free.

As that makes clear, Gnosticism as a belief system is difficult to define since it is not a well-organized or uniform doctrine like Christianity or Judaism, but at one time there was some synchronization with Christianity that nurtured both movements. As a religion and philosophy, Gnosticism flourished alongside Christianity, and it is not easy to say which one came first, but it is certain that both movements influenced each other. To paraphrase John Dominic Crossan, it is unclear whether Gnosticism was a Christian heresy, a Jewish heresy, or an original religion that powerfully

merged with both. Gnosticism borrowed elements from Christians, just as the whole of Christianity took a certain Gnostic flavor, to the point that some books of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John, could easily pass as a proto-Gnostic document.

At the risk of oversimplifying, Gnosticism was the belief that the souls are divine sparks imprisoned in imperfect physical bodies, due to the machinations of a lesser and evil god who created the world. This evil god is identified with the creator of the Genesis and the Hebrew Bible. The material world and the body are prisons separated from the divine realm, from which humans must escape through the ascent of various levels. This is possible through the acquisition of secret knowledge reserved for the elect. This special revelation or gnosis (knowledge) was supposedly disclosed by Jesus to his dearest disciples, and it can be found in the Gnostic books, deliberately written in cryptic language. The acquisition of the secrets necessary for the salvation of the soul in many cases implied a radical asceticism and corporal sacrifice.

Due to such classical roots, it would be easy to conclude that Gnosticism is an ancient philosophy, and a cursory glance might categorize it as simply a way of understanding the world and promoting investigation. However, the term is most often used to describe not a philosophy but a religion, and not just any religion, but a branch of one of the most resilient and influential traditions in history: Christianity. So what exactly is Gnosticism, and why does it remain such a source of confusion, captivation, and charisma for modern scholarship and culture alike? These answers are complex, and indicative of how the many turnings of the last two millennia have unexpectedly unearthed some answers while burying others even deeper.

*Gnosticism: The History and Legacy of the Mysterious Ancient Religion* looks at the different origins that shaped Gnosticism, what Gnostics believed and practiced, and the influence they had on other religions. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Gnosticism like never before.

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## Discovering the Nag Hammadi Library and the Origins of Gnosticism

Primary sources suggest that the Gnostics apparently began as a heretical Christian sect that was polemicized and disenfranchised by the religious authorities of their time. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, published the treatise *Against Heresies* in the late 2nd century CE, and the Gnostics were the main focus of his refutations.[2] In fact, the original title of his work was *On the Detection and Overthrow of What Is Falsely Called Gnosis*. But these and other similar attacks by authors who are now revered as Church fathers are slightly misleading, because at the time of the earliest Gnostics, there was still no unified Christian Church. The Council of Nicaea, during which the early Church's theological underpinnings were set out, was still almost 200 years away.

Of course, as Irenaeus's work suggests, it is without question that there was a core group of Christians who were seeking to consolidate the faith in the early centuries. The scriptural letters of Paul are full of attempts to dissuade people from certain beliefs and to instill what is thought to be orthodoxy, or the right way (see especially Galatians 1, 3 and 12). The strand of faith that is found in the New Testament, anchored in the Nicaean Creed, and defended by writers like Irenaeus is what would become considered Christianity.

However, this was not so at the time of the Gnostics, which means the Gnostics were not necessarily in defiance of the true faith, but instead a group who believed they were the ones practicing the faith. Instead of rebels, the Gnostics were simply another faith tradition that lost out in the struggle, and unfortunately for those who wish to fully understand them, their story was largely left to be told by their conquerors. The Gnostics were mystics who had no real use or hope for the world, and their writings became forbidden when the Church defined the canon of the books authorized to be read in the congregation.

For some reason, instead of burning them, some Gnostic monks at Nag Hammadi decided to entrust them to posterity, perhaps waiting for better times. Like that other great discovery of the 20th century, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the gospels and other tractates of Nag Hammadi were just waiting to be discovered, and both would be found just a few months apart.

In December 1945, while the world celebrated the end of World War II, the newly independent Egypt, divided in bloody tribal wars, demanded a complete withdrawal of British troops. During this time, a group of peasants made one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, as far as ancient documents are concerned.

Near the present city of Nag Hammadi, three brothers along with four other camel riders were digging in search of sabakh, nitrate-rich soil that is applied as fertilizer to hard land. Below, behind, or beside a colossal round-shaped boulder split in two, the brothers found an ancient amphora 60 centimeters high, sealed with an ancient plate about 20 centimeters wide. Muhammed Ali, the eldest brother, aged 26, took the jar. At first, they were afraid to break it, thinking that it might have a jinn or genie inside, but they also remembered ancient legends about buried treasures in the region.

Ultimately, the ambition of riches was greater than fear of the supernatural, so Muhammed broke the jug with his hoe to inspect the contents. According to his testimony, when the jar cracked, a cloud of gold-like dust dispersed in the air. Inside, he found a series of old leather-bound books. Thinking that he could get some money from them, the young man distributed the codices among the four camel riders, but they refused to touch them thinking that they might be haunted. Muhammed then formed a single pile and used his headdress to tie them up, and carried them on his shoulder. The young man later admitted that some sheets and several covers were abandoned at that place. When he got home, he went to the yard where his mother used to make bread and looked after cattle and threw the codices and the few loose leaves. His mother later revealed that she used several pages to light up the fire to prepare a meal. As a result, the collection suffered greater damage in the first days of its discovery than in the previous 16 centuries.

Due to a feud among families that had degenerated in violence, Muhammad left the codices in a neighbor's house who was also a priest in the church of al-Qasr, at the monastery of Saint Palamon. The neighbor kept them in a drawer for one month. In the following days, the brothers sold the codices to different people and shopkeepers for few coins. During that time, a relative of the al-Qasr priest, who taught History and English in different villages, saw them and commented that they could be of much more value than they

thought. The teacher seized a codex and gave Muhammed Ali a coat for another, and in October 1946 he sold them to the Coptic Museum of Cairo. When the news reached some scholars, the brothers realized that they had squandered potential profits. They went to recover some of the texts by force, in some cases shooting the houses of the possessors.

In two years, most of the codices were recovered from an antiques dealer named Phocion Tano from El Cairo, who admitted in an interview in 1971 that he had acquired them through several independent operations with small traders. However, one of the codices had already left Egypt through a Belgian seller, who bought it for 5,000 pounds and offered it to the Jung Institute in Zurich. In October 1947, the director of the Coptic Museum showed the tractates to the French historian Jean Doresse, a scholar of Egyptology and Greek papyrology who for five years had undertaken expeditions on behalf of the French government; Doresse had also established the first archaeological service in Ethiopia. The museum director wanted Doresse to tell him what those documents were and whether they had any historical value.

The French scholar was the first to professionally examine the collection and set about the task of making an inventory. Immediately, he realized that he had a collection of Christian texts of great antiquity in his hands, hitherto unknown, or only through vague references in patristic writings. Most had disappeared from history in the 4$^{th}$ century CE, and no one had ever seen them again.

At the end of the second codex, Doresse recognized a document that had been lost for centuries except for a few fragments in the British Museum. The tiny fragments in Greek had been found in Egypt at the end of the 19$^{th}$ century in a place called Oxyrhynchus; but they were only fragments (in some cases no more than 5 x 3 inches) and already the subject of heated debates: they were, apparently, a collection of sayings of Jesus, mostly unknown. Doresse recognized some sentences and knew that he had the full version before him, and even the name of the document: the Gospel of Thomas. It had been lost for 1500 years.

The scholar released the first news of the finding to the international community in 1948. Immediately, the newspapers began to speak of the

discovery of a fifth gospel. Since 1956, recognizing its importance, an international committee of seven experts in Coptic language (The United States was represented by Dr. Theodore Petersen of the Catholic University of America) met in the Coptic Museum of Cairo to begin the translation of the Gospel of Thomas.

It would take several years before the collection was gathered again in one place, as it had once been under the dry soil of Egypt. A woman named Maria Dattari was arrested with several sheets at the airport after she apparently intended to take them out of Egypt and hand them over to the Pope in Rome. Eventually, all the codices were nationalized by the government of Egypt, which managed to recover Codex I from Zurich.

In 1975, after 30 years of being dispersed, the library of Nag Hammadi was reunited once again in the Coptic Museum of Old Cairo. The library of Nag Hammadi is composed of 12 ancient books or codices and loose leaves from a 13$^{th}$ codex, which collectively comprise 52 tractates (although some appear twice, as is the case with the Gospel of Truth). Only six of them were known in the fragmentary state, meaning 40 were novelties. Biblical scholars also knew some sentences from The Gospel of Truth or the Secret Book of John thanks to the writings of the Church Fathers.

The Nag Hammadi tractates are not full books like Genesis, Exodus, or the Gospel of Luke, which have 38.000, 32.000, and 25.000 words respectively, but rather treatises or essays. The Prayer of the Apostle Paul has only 244 words (although two lines are missing), and The Book of Thomas the Contender has 3300 words, to give two examples. The gospels in the collection are undoubtedly the most famous texts, but the library also contains other genres besides gospels (a total of four), such as apocalypses, dialogues, epistles, records, doctrinal treatises, wisdom books, homilies and prayers. It is estimated that all were originally written in Greek, the lingua franca of the time, but the texts recovered in Nag Hammadi are in Coptic, the language spoken in Egypt.

Physically, the texts are in the form of codices and not scrolls. The codex is the closest thing to a modern book, composed of sheets tied together along the fold. In contrast, the scroll had to be unrolled, was harder to handle,

transport and preserve, and took up more space. Due to of all these disadvantages, the codex became popular around 1st century CE.

When experts began to study and translate the documents, they soon realized that, in their vast majority, they were the writings of a variety of Christianity known as Gnosticism, with one or two exceptions (and even these had a certain Gnostic flavor, like the Gospel of Thomas, of which Nag Hammadi preserved a version that had already passed through several redactional stages). Also found among the codices was a section of Plato's *Republic*, which was not originally a Gnostic work, but the Egyptian version had been modified.

Jean Doresse was the first scholar to locate the youngsters who made the discovery, and he was able to convince them to take him on a small safari to the exact place. Doresse had to face the brothers´ zeal, and the danger of being ambushed by rival clans. Indeed, he was actually attacked by a wild dog and had to go to the hospital before he finally reached the narrow plain flanked by a wall of shrubs and a nearly vertical cliff. In the middle, several large spherical boulders had rolled from the mountains in remote times. Near the site, he found a cemetery of Roman times with several caves, some unoccupied. Doresse wrote in 1950, “Was it in one of these tombs that the papyri were found? Certainly, one cannot, even if one searches very far around, see any other place—any ruin or sepulcher— from which they could have come. The peasants who accompanied us (...) showed us a row of shapeless cavities. Not long since, they said, some peasants of Hamra-Dûm and of Dabba, in search of manure, found here a great zir —which means jar — filled with leaves of papyrus; and these were bound like books. The vase was broken and nothing remains of it; the manuscripts were taken to Cairo and no one knows what then became of them. As to the exact location of the find, opinion differed by some few dozen yards, but everyone was sure that it was just about here. And from the ground itself we shall learn nothing more; it yields nothing but broken bones, fragments of cloth without interest, and some potsherds.”

The caves, whose walls still contain painted crosses and fragments of psalms, were occupied by monks in the 4th century CE. In Egypt, monasticism was founded by a saint named Pachomius, who gathered several

hermits in the area. Eventually, the monks left the nearby monasteries (Pabau was 5 miles away from the place where the codices were found; Tabennesi was 9 miles away, and Chenoboskion, 6 miles) and retired to live in caves in search of a less comfortable life, one more in accord with the rigid spirituality and asceticism reflected in the Nag Hammadi codices. "Pachomius," James Robinson quotes in *The Life of Pachomius*, "taught the brothers to pay no attention to the loveliness and beauty of this world, whether it be beautiful food or clothing, or a cell, or an outwardly seductive book." Against the trend of official Christianity, which had become institutionalized and the official religion of the Roman Empire, Pachomius´s monks aspired to a more austere and spiritual-oriented Christianity, inspired by the afterlife. "They were the hippies of the day," as Robinson put it.

The year 367 marked a watershed for the Church. In that year, St. Athanasius, the first bishop to define the authorized books of the New Testament, warned about the multiplication of false gospels and epistles falsely attributed to the apostles in one of his "Easter letters." Paraphrasing Luke the evangelist, Athanasius wrote, “Forasmuch as some have taken in hand to reduce into order for themselves the books termed apocryphal, and to mix them up with the divinely inspired Scripture, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, as they who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, delivered to the fathers; it seemed good to me also, having been urged thereto by true brethren, and having learned from the beginning, to set before you the books included in the Canon, and handed down, and accredited as Divine; to the end that anyone who has fallen into error may condemn those who have led him astray; and that he who has continued stedfast in purity may again rejoice, having these things brought to his remembrance.” The letter listed the books which he considered to be inspired: the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the Acts of the Apostles; 14 Pauline epistles; the seven Catholic Epistles, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the Apocalypse of John. It also approved the reading of other books that, although not a part of the canon, could be consulted "by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness," among them the book of Tobias, Esther and The Shepherd of Hermas. As for the rest of the gospels, epistles and apocalypses in circulation, which were being produced without control, “they are an invention of heretics, who write

them when they choose, bestowing upon them their approbation, and assigning to them a date, that so, using them as ancient writings, they may find occasion to lead astray the simple."

Athanasius´s letter was distributed to all the churches and had a huge impact. In Egypt, it led to a purge of heretical books by Theodore, the Alexandrian Patriarch and successor of Pachomius.

It seems likely that the Nag Hammadi library was buried as a result of the letter, but even that much is speculation. It is unclear who sealed and hid the 13 (or more) Nag Hammadi codices with such care, and whether they were buried with the intent of being forgotten or rescued in the distant future. The most accepted theory is that they were buried by the monks of Egypt, who accepted Athanasius´ authority but believed that their books did not deserve to be destroyed.

What the discovery proved was that if Gnosticism was indeed an independent religion, then at some point it "borrowed" the figure of Jesus Christ and placed its doctrine in the lips of the Jewish rabbi. Henri-Charles Puech, who was part of the international committee that studied documents for the first time under the patronage of UNESCO, described Gnosticism as "a stream of religious thought that adhered to Christianity, as it did with other Mediterranean religions and from the Middle East."

It is possible that Gnosticism left its mark in the New Testament, although it is not mentioned by name. In his epistles, Paul mentions opponents who preach "another gospel." They may have been Gnostics. The Gospel of John, according to some scholars like Rudolf Bultmann, is also impregnated with Gnostic concepts; the fracture suffered inside the Johannine community at the end of the 1st century CE could have been due to internal polemics between proto-gnostics and those who still understood Jesus as fully human.

Regardless, many Christian theologians of the 2nd century CE were Gnostics. The most relevant was the figure of Valentinus, a preeminent author and teacher who on one occasion was a candidate to be the bishop of Rome (thus the successor to Peter), but began his own group when he was not elected. Many scholars of the Nag Hammadi codices are certain that Valentin, probably the most important Christian Gnostic in history, was the

author of several tractates.

Although a large number of gospels and tractates of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE have been labeled as “Gnostic,” not all share the same vision of the human being and the world. However, there are common themes that run across the texts. Recurring topics include the destiny of souls after death, the journey of the spirit to acquire the divine knowledge necessary to be saved, and the tests that the soul must pass to enter heaven, such as knowing certain secret words. Many “pages” are devoted to thoroughly explain heavenly hierarchies, the origin and destination of the cosmos, as well as the true personality of God and Jesus.

The texts often have a pedantic style and attitude towards the rest of the world or the uninitiated, who live in ignorance. For instance, in some Gnostic documents, Jesus and Christ are two different beings. Jesus is a human and Christ a divine spirit that departs Jesus´s mortal body at the crucifixion, to escape suffering. According to the Apocalypse of Peter, found in Nag Hammadi, the leader of the apostles had a vision of what really happened at the Golgotha - Christ is floating above the cross laughing because his executioners don´t know he has escaped and is safe. Hence, Jesus, the man, says, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Supposedly it is the apostle Peter who writes, “`What do I see, O Lord? That it is you yourself whom they take, and that you are grasping me? Or who is this one, glad and laughing on the tree? And is it another one whose feet and hands they are striking?´ The Savior said to me, `He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness. But look at him and me.´"

In general, the Gnostic gospels are not interested in the earthly life of Jesus, but in his post-mortem existence, especially his apparitions, and in particular the days between his resurrection and his ascension to heaven. According to the Gnostic texts, Christ gave special teachings to his apostles during that time. Thus, the canonical gospels are more interested in the sayings and deeds of Jesus, but not in significant detail; Gnostics authors often describe people's reactions; characters in their texts are ashamed or perplexed; they laugh and often kiss each other —Jesus is laughing at the cross— but these

reactions function as symbols of spiritual realities. When Jesus kisses Mary Magdalene or his brother James, these are symbols of transmission of gnosis rather than erotic or homoerotic feelings. And unlike St. Paul's letters, for example, the Gnostic epistles are more philosophical treatises —almost incomprehensible, at least to the uninitiated— than moral instruction.

A typical case of a Gnostic scene and its concerns can be found in the Letter of Peter to Philip, where the apostles gather on a mountaintop to ask Jesus, who is in Heaven: "Lord, we would like to know the deficiency of the aeons and their pleroma." "How are we detained in this dwelling place?" "How did we come to this place?" "In what manner shall we depart?" "How do we have the authority of boldness?" "Why do the powers fight against us?"

Reading Gnostic documents is not an easy task. The style is tortuous, disorganized, and sometimes almost entirely incomprehensible, not to say tedious. For those who seek historical information on the life of Jesus, the apostles, or the beginnings of Christianity, the Nag Hammadi library, despite containing several Gospels and documents attributed to Peter, Philip and James, will not provide much valuable material, aside from one or two important exceptions. They also don’t say much about the history of the church, nor even about the history of Christian Gnosticism, which reached its climax in the 2nd century CE before disappearing under the weight of orthodoxy. Nonetheless, the treatises are a rich source of information about the beliefs, the worldview, and the Gnostics´ peculiar way of reinterpreting famous passages of the Bible.

With that said, it is still possible to find traces of the authentic voice of Jesus or his early followers in these gospels, or at least some hint or historical memory about his life. The Gospel of Thomas contains unknown sayings of Jesus that may go back to his ministry, and the Apocryphon of James seems to preserve a historical memory of James’s death. Applying high textual criticism, it is possible to handpick a small number of gems that, in their original version, would provide historical information about Jesus and his apostles, although the copyist of the Nag Hammadi codices reworked and embellished his texts to the point of rendering them almost unrecognizable. This is the case for the Acts of Peter and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter,

which may preserve traditions of the early years.

Both findings shared similar destinies after coming to light. Both the library of the Essenes and that of the community that buried the Nag Hammadi codices had to wait decades until they were finally published; both collections also suffered irreparable damage in the first days due to the inadequate handling of the documents. Ultimately, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospels and tractates of Nag Hammadi were the two most important archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century in the field of ancient texts.

During the last century, however, this is becoming less the case. In the Egyptian desert in 1945, a discovery born of blind luck delivered Gnostic texts—some previously unknown, and others that adding to existing manuscripts—into the hands of modern scholars. Thanks immensely to the study of these texts, Gnosticism as a historical subject is beginning to take shape. New insights into Gnostic myths and rituals let us know what some early Christians were thinking and how they were tackling issues of human existence, God, and evil. In some ways, revelations in Gnostic texts have shown how some facets of “orthodox” Christianity developed partially in direct answer to these teachings.[3]

**Differences Between Gnosticism and Christianity**

Since much of the 2nd and 3rd century history of Gnosticism is either lost to time or colored by antagonism, the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945 supplied a much-needed taste of factual narrative to the Gnostic story, yet even this more modern tale is still being pieced together by investigators, which is perhaps fitting given the mystery that has always surrounded the Gnostic tradition.

The books in the Nag Hammadi collection were unlike any Christian texts that the world had encountered before. There were new gospel texts that were attributed to prominent figures such as the apostles Philip and John the son of Zebedee, James the brother of Jesus, and his twin brother Thomas. It was not an uncommon feature in the ancient world (where nothing like copyright laws held sway) to attribute a treatise to a prominent figure in order to increase its gravitas and readership. Thus, although the texts themselves were found not to have been written by the authors as claimed, they were nonetheless serious texts that were intended to make serious claims about the nature of the world and humanity's place within it.[4] They covered topics ranging from the secret, "truer" teachings of Jesus found in the aforementioned Gnostic gospels to mystical musings on the true nature of the cosmos.

A unifying thread in all of these Gnostic texts was the assumption that there is not one God who rules heaven and earth, having created the world as good and according to His will. Instead, the message was that this world was not good, and not even close to being good. The physical world was instead brought about by an inferior deity who falsely and pridefully believed himself to be the one true God.[5] The Gnostics seem to have been profoundly impacted by the imperfection and suffering that characterized physical life, and espoused doctrines that taught how to escape this physical world that is our prison rather than our home.[6]

One of the Nag Hammadi texts was untitled, but modern scholars have dubbed it the *Gospel of Truth* in keeping with its opening lines: "The gospel of truth is joy for those who have received from the Father of truth the grace of knowing him, through the power of the Word that came forth from the Pleroma, the one who is in the thought and the mind of the Father, that is, the

one who is addressed as the Savior."[7] While the *Gospel of Truth* is anonymous, it is helpful for two important reasons. First, the text is unusually clear in the way it spells out how Gnostics understand their path to salvation. Second, it coincides with many of the teachings of a famous Gnostic figure, Valentinus, who taught in Rome in the 2nd century CE. Valentinus is discussed in much more detail further below, but it is important to note that Valentinian Christianity was a major target for proto-orthodox writers like Tertullian and Irenaeus. *The Gospel of Truth*, then, can justifiably be considered an accurate representation of early Gnostic thought, and the severity of Iranaeus's attacks on it are proof that it was taken seriously and viewed as a major threat by other Christians. Iranaeus wrote of it, "But the followers of Valentinus, putting away all fear, bring forward their own compositions and boast that they have more Gospels than really exist. Indeed their audacity has gone so far that they entitle their recent composition the Gospel of Truth, though it agrees in nothing with the Gospels of the apostles, and so no Gospel of theirs is free from blasphemy. For if what they produce is the Gospel of Truth, and is different from those the apostles handed down to us, those who care to can learn how it can be shown from the Scriptures themselves that [then] what is handed down from the apostles is not the Gospel of Truth."

Despite being referred to as a gospel even within the text, this is not an account of the words or deeds of Jesus Christ, as might be expected. Instead, *The Gospel of Truth* is more a representation of the direct meaning of the word: "good news."[8] Truth is a revelry in the salvation that Jesus brought into the world by way of the secret teachings and knowledge that are capable of liberating the soul from its material prison. The text touches on issues of God's divine nature, the makeup of both the physical and immaterial worlds, Christ's person, the function of his salvation, and the proper response to his teachings.

In particular, *The Gospel of Truth* presents a view of the world that stands in direct opposition to what would become the Orthodox position and was already the position in the Hebrew culture. In Orthodox Christianity, the material world is inherently good. It was created by the one true God and it was done so intentionally, so even though sin later seeped in to corrupt it, the

initial creation and – importantly - the intentions of the Creator were good. *The Gospel of Truth*, however, claims that the creation of this world was not a conscious decision made by a benevolent God, but the result of a cosmic error: “Ignorance of the Father brought anguish and terror; and the anguish grew solid like a fog so that no one was able to see. For this reason error became powerful; it worked on its own matter foolishly, not having known the truth. It set about with a creation, preparing with power and beauty the substitute for the truth.”[9]

Furthermore, Orthodox Christianity claims that salvation of the world came through Christ’s death and resurrection, which he endured for the sake of redeeming human sin. The work of redemption, then, was done for humanity and not by humanity. In this Gnostic text, however, salvation follows a very different mechanism. Here, humans are tasked with receiving and properly interpreting the secret truths that Jesus brought with him and preached. Furthermore, his persecution and death were not part of a divine plan, but instead a punishment meted out by the ignorant creators of this world who were angry with him for bringing this knowledge to humanity: “Jesus, the Christ, enlightened those who were in darkness through oblivion. He enlightened them; he showed them a way; and the way is the truth which he taught them. For this reason error grew angry with him and persecuted him… He was nailed to a tree and he became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father.”[10]

In Orthodox Christianity, humans are supposedly saved by undergoing a change in their relationship with God through a professed faith in Jesus’s sacrifice and resurrection. In *The Gospel of Truth*, however, there is no change in the person. In fact, in order to be saved a human must instead attain knowledge of their true nature, which is one that has no place in the material world. In other words, it is knowledge rather than faith that saves a Gnostic: “There came the men wise in their own estimation, putting him to the test. But he confounded them because they were foolish. They hated him because they were not really wise. After these, there came the little children also, those to whom the knowledge of the Father belongs. Having been strengthened, they learned about the impressions of the Father. They knew, they were known; they were glorified, they glorified…But those who are to

receive teaching are the living who are inscribed in the book of the living. It is about themselves that they receive instruction."[11]

Finally, there is a fundamental disagreement over the nature and purpose of the physical world. In Orthodox Christianity, the physical world is the vessel for bringing forth God's eternal kingdom. God is meant to redeem the sinful world and restore it as it was meant to be in his original creation. *The Gospel of Truth* rejects this notion entirely, though not polemically: "Since the deficiency came into being because the Father was not known, therefore, when the Father is known, from that moment on, the deficiency will no longer exist. As in the case of the ignorance of a person, when he comes to have knowledge, his ignorance vanishes of itself, as the darkness when light appears, so also the deficiency vanishes in the perfection."[12]

Perhaps most confusing in the Gnostic version of world salvation is exactly how the world itself can reach a point where the ignorance that created it is eclipsed by knowledge of God. Will the material world persist until all human souls have attained knowledge of God? Or is the message instead that, once a soul has been saved by the knowledge of its own nature, the material world becomes inconsequential? Valentinus, who is perhaps most responsible for the integration of Gnosticism and mainstream Christianity, would deal at length with these issues.

Of the 46 works that were discovered and translated, there is one that has stood above the rest because of its implications not only regarding the history of Gnosticism but the development of Christianity as a whole. Commonly referred to as *The Gospel of Thomas*, meant to be attributed to Jesus's twin brother Didymus Judas Thomas, this book is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus and is a mixture of mystery and familiarity.

Of the 114 collected sayings, almost 80 have direct connections to sayings that are found in the synoptic New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.[13] These texts are referred to as synoptic (literally meaning "seen together") because they all share common stories. Mark is the earliest and thought to be the primary source, and there are theories that a further missing source (known as Q among New Testament scholars) links Matthew and Luke. This gives readers significant information about the Gospel of

Thomas's creation, namely that it was certainly written no earlier than the 2nd century CE since it is clearly drawing upon the gospels or traditions already in existence. At the same time, however, it includes dated findings and references that could be as old as the mid-2nd century CE.[14]

For example, Saying 34 reads, "If a blind man leads a blind man, they will both fall into a pit.[15] This is highly reminiscent of Matthew 15:14: "Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

Many of these overlaps find the versions in *The Gospel of Thomas* to be more concise than their New Testament counterparts. Some historians have put forth the suggestion that this might mean Thomas's sayings are closer to the original (meaning they are closer to how Jesus may have actually spoken in real life).[16]

What truly distinguishes *The Gospel of Thomas* are the remaining sayings, the ones without New Testament correlations. Here, the text presents an altogether different type of Jesus, who speaks in even more cryptic parables:

> "When you make the two into one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female; when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the kingdom." (Saying 22).
>
> Jesus said, "Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him." (Saying 108).
>
> "Jesus said, 'The kingdom of the Father is like a woman who was carrying a jar full of meal. While she was walking along a distant road, the handle of the jar broke, and the meal spilled out behind her along the road. She didn't know; she didn't understand how to toil. When she reached her house, she put down the jar and discovered that it was empty.'"

> “Simon Peter said to them, ‘Make Mary leave us, for females are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too might become a living male spirit, like you. For every female that makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.’” (Saying 114).

Clearly, these sayings are meant to leave the reader or listener wondering about their meaning, but common among most of them is a message that humans both suffer from an incomplete understanding of the truths in the world and that salvation is dependent on some amount of intellectual work being done. In other words, *The Gospel of Thomas* does not present a picture of a divine savior who came as a sacrifice for the liberation of mankind. Instead, Jesus remains a teacher in this Gnostic scripture. According to the very first saying, “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, ‘Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.’”[17] The message could not be much clearer: discern what it is that Jesus means in these sayings and one will have eternal life.

Critical to the teachings in *The Gospel of Thomas* - and very much in keeping with what is known about Gnostic mythology - is the insistence that people are not meant for this physical world. Instead, people are meant to be “passersby,” beings who belong to the “realm of spirit and light” and can only regain knowledge and possession of that status by learning the secrets behind Jesus’s words.[18] Although much of this text can be linked with more a more familiar Jesus and mainstream Christian teachings, it is these moments of insistence on hidden knowledge and lost identity that makes *The Gospel of Thomas* a decidedly Gnostic text.

So what exactly is the vision of the universe within which the Gospel of Thomas fits?

## Gnostic Mythology

Much like any other religion, Gnosticism was built around a core cosmological narrative that attempted to make sense of existence. Interestingly, however, what tends to make the Gnostic mythology unique is a clear and early obsession with the negative aspects of life. Suffering, death, disease, sadness, and evil are all unavoidable in the course of a human life and, while people have often been conditioned to find a use for these ills, the fact remains that they are inevitably unsavory.

Rather than espouse traditional Christian teachings, which seek to use or learn from suffering, however, the Gnostics took a slightly different approach. Put simply, they wanted to explain why these ills existed, not how to live with them. The picture of the cosmos that resulted from this impulse is at times epic, poetic, philosophical, and occasionally demoralizing for those who would like to preserve a semblance of usefulness for everything that exists around them.

The ensuing story is that of an Eternal Creator, the offspring of his pure divine thought; how one of those offspring strayed from the order of things, bringing about the first being which had no connection to the Creator; how that ignorant and indignant being created a physical cage within which he trapped pieces of light and clouded their vision; and, finally, about those offspring of light that were tricked and imprisoned in mortal bondage: people.

The most useful text for piecing together the details of Gnostic mythology is undoubtedly *Apocryphon of John* (or *Secret Book of John*). Within it, readers can find the entire creation myth, as well as illuminations on how exactly this world of the Gnostics fits into the more widely circulated vision of the cosmos that is found in the Old Testament.

In the beginning, according to the *Secret Book of John* (*SBJ*), there is only the One, known occasionally as the Monad, the Invisible Spirit, or "Father of the All."[19] The first steps of creation follow from an internal process conducted by the One, who upon absorbing its reflection in the "living water" of the cosmos brings forth the very first creation: Forethought/Providence, which is the power that precedes everything.[20] Professor Bart Ehrman

provides a concise and condensed explanation for the mechanism and logic behind the One's creation in Gnostic myth: "[T]his one unknowable God, for some unknowable reason, generated a divine realm from himself…this One spends eternity thinking. He thinks, of course, only of himself, since he is all there is. But his thought itself must exist, since he thinks. And so his thought becomes its own entity. Moreover, this One always exists. And so his eternal existence, his eternality, exists. And so it becomes its own entity. This One is living; in fact, he is Life. And so his life itself exists. Life then becomes its own entity. And so on."[21]

Professor Ehrman's explanation may come across a bit flippant in how direct it is, but the way he marks out the progression of creation is helpfully indicative of the way Gnostics appear to have ordered their world. This explanation illustrates how the Gnostic mythology might have developed in an almost Socratic fashion, beginning with a basic, accepted premise and resulting in ongoing levels of creation and truth based on the principles of logic.

This "first emanation of the Father" is called Barbēlō by the Gnostics, and it is characterized in different ways at different times. Most often, Barbēlō is referred to in feminine terms, usually by way of some reference to a womb of creation or eternal womb, which is meant to associate her directly with the One, often referred to as Father. At other times, the reference is androgynous, such as the description of Barbēlō as "Mother-Father." These distinctions are important to keep in mind, because although the pronoun "she" is always used for Barbēlō directly, there are several androgynous monikers ascribed to her.

After her creation, Barbēlō requests four further powers from the One, and she is given the attributes of Foreknowledge, Incorruptibility, Eternal Life, and Truth.[22] Already, at the very inception of creation, the Gnostics were placing thought, knowledge, and self-reflection at the forefront. In what Edward Moore and John Turner refer to as a "contemplative" protology, *SBJ* depicts a universe that is born of and controlled by thought.

Barbēlō's classification is the first of the beings known as Aeons, the products of the One's thought. *SBJ* recounts a series of further offspring,

brought about by exchanges between Barbēlō and the One, which result in the creation of the other Aeons.

Finally, among the last of the genuine creations of the One is the "Child of Light," which is said to have been self-generated by Barbēlō. Much like Barbēlō before, the Light requests a power from the One and is given the aspect of Mind.[23]

What results is a complex series of interactions, creations, and unions. The Light individually produces four Luminaries, each consisting of three Aeons, for a total of 12.[24] Then, in cooperation with both Barbēlō and the One, the Light helps to bring forth "primal man," called Geradamas, or "ancient Adam." This primal man appoints his son, Seth, to rule over what is known as the "second eternal realm," or the Fullness, where the Aeons reside. Moore and Turner helpfully summarize this stage in the cycle: "We are now in the realm of the Fullness…in which a series of intellectual couplings occurs betwixt the various aeons, each producing in its turn a new aeon. The rule is that no single aeon can produce without its consort; to do so is to break the chain of perfection, in which the male supplies the form and the female substance of any subsequent offspring. This is precisely what Sophia (Wisdom), the last of the initial twelve aeons, does."[25]

It is the tragic story of Sophia and her offspring that makes up much of the rest of *SBJ*, but first it will be useful to begin pointing out some parallels between *SBJ*, Christian theology, and classical Platonic thought. Despite the complexities and unique mythologizing, one can already see the faint traces of Christian thinking within this Gnostic origin story. There is a single Creator who occupies the role of symbolic father to the universe. This Creator draws from his own mind to bring forth a first being, which goes on to occupy the role of Mother to the rest of the cosmos. Through a direct comingling of this divine mother and father pairing, a child is born that goes on to be instrumental in the construction of the rest of the universe, including archetypal humans. Here, there seems to be a clear connection to the teachings of Plato, whose work on the "Forms" would have been well-known among most intellectual circles in the 2nd century CE.

There are two kinds of worlds: the visible world we perceive with our

senses is mortal, composite, and always changing, whereas the invisible world of the Forms is intelligible, simple and unchanging. The soul craves to be free of bodily endeavors and reach the unchanging and the rational, whereas the body moves to the realm of sense-perception. Therefore, since the two main human substances, body and soul, resemble two different worlds, they follow the fate of their respective worlds. This is the sense of the celebrated but otherwise extravagant claim (*Phaedo* 64d) that philosophy is preparation for death. If death unites with the unchanging and the essential, then philosophers prepare all their sense-bounded life to enjoy their real life in the realm of the Forms.

But what are these Forms? (The Greek word is *eidos*, form or kind). In the relevant works (*Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedrus*) Plato never propounds a systematic theory of what the intelligible entities are supposed to be; he only gives sketches of an argument and myths to safeguard his conception. Socrates claims that that the theory of Forms was his "second voyage" after his materialist quest to find the initial, more general causes/explanations of things in the world failed. Since no water, air or other material principle could possibly be a first cause or principle, "I assume in each case some principle which I consider strongest, and whatever seems to me to agree with this, whether relating to cause or to anything else, I regard as true, and whatever disagrees with it, as untrue" (*Phaedo* 100a).

This kind of working hypothesis is based on strong convictions nevertheless. Relativism and discrepancy that haunts the application of general terms (equal things may look unequal under a different perspective, what appears to be just may also appear unjust etc.) seem to vanish when we consider those terms by themselves (equality, justice, temperance and so on), which are stable, unchanging, permanent. Where did we get this impression from? Materialist tendencies cannot explain this discrepancy, and can never assume the role of first principles. When I decide to move from Athens to Sparta, the cause of my journey has to be my decision, not my bones and legs. Bones and legs are the things without which my decision would never have been fulfilled, but they are not the cause of my leaving; my decision is. The Forms should operate in the same way.

Particular things, then, can only approximate Forms. Equal things fall

short of being like abstract, immutable and simple, even though they strive to be like them. They can only participate in the realm of the intelligible (this is what the Greek term *methexis* denotes), and properties in sensible things (equality, whiteness, roundness etc.) are only copies of the original Forms. Copies depend on the original for their existence, and sensible things depend on the Forms as the entities that provide a sufficient account of their being in the world.

Everything that makes up the physical world, then, is not truly real but instead an imitation or "shadow" of its corresponding form. Every tree that grows in the forest is really just an imperfect representation of the form of Tree. This is used partly as an explanation for why we can look at an oak, maple, and dogwood and instinctively label all of them trees. Even though in their details they are remarkably different, they seem to share some amount of "treeness" that we recognize. This characteristic of "treeness" is representative of the piece of the form that each tree has captured. Similarly, the discussion of Geradamas in *SBJ* is reminiscent of a discussion of Platonic forms. This creation is not a human because it exists in spiritual realm of pure light, yet the text presents it as somehow indicative of the Form that we physical humans are imitating.

To continue with the narrative, Sophia, a being commonly associated with the trait of Wisdom, seeks to bring forth a new creation that is like herself and without approval of the Father or consideration from her assigned consort. Despite not adhering to the Father's rules for creation, there is enough of the One's power within her that she is able to give birth to a new breed of Being. This offspring, "the formless Yaldabaoth, the creator of the material cosmos," is the first Archon. The Archons are a type of being that have no direct connection to the One and are thus ignorant of the spiritual realms of the Fullness that lie above them.

Sophia worries that her creation will be discovered and her transgressions made known, so she sweeps Yaldabaoth away from the divine realm and hides him in a lower sphere of existence where none can see him. The disastrous side effect of this decision, however, is that although none of the Aeons or the One can see Yaldabaoth, neither can Yaldabaoth see them. Thus, instead of the light of the upper realms, Yaldabaoth looks downward and sees a murky abyss. He seeks to create, as is the nature of Being in the Gnostic cosmos, but he does not have the proper tools or knowledge. Instead

of consorting with a being of light, Yaldabaoth consorts with the Fullness as it is reflected in the abyss below, resulting in a cosmos that is flawed in its materiality, "a weaker image of a weak reflection."[26]

Yaldabaoth continues with his flawed creation, driven by the natural impulse that he inherited from his mother: "Yaldabaoth organized everything after the pattern of the first aeons that had come into being, so that he might create everything in an incorruptible form. Not that he had seen the incorruptible ones. Rather, the power that is in him, that he had taken from his mother, produced in him the pattern for the world order."[27]

The Gnostic mythology is thus meant to show not only how the divine realm came into being, but also how this material world became manifest and why it is (to the Gnostics) such an inadequate and undesirable state of existence. The creation story exhibits a clear pattern of downward progression from the perfect form of existence, spirit, to its perverted offspring, matter. Beginning even with the emanation of Barbēlō from the One, each successive step in creation is slightly less perfect than the one that preceded it. By the time creation has reached Yaldabaoth, he has little in common with the divine, and so the creation of his mind is equally malformed.

The name Yaldabaoth is somewhat reminiscent of Yahweh, the name for the God of the Hebrew Old Testament, and this is no accident because according to Gnostic tradition, these two entities are one and the same. Yaldabaoth occasionally speaks in direct echo of some Old Testament scriptures. For instance, after completing his material world in *SBJ*, Yaldabaoth declares, "I am a jealous god and there is no other god beside me."[28] In a passage that is perfectly illustrative of the role of logic in Gnostic thinking, Yaldabaoth's minions hear this declaration and wonder. Instead of humbling themselves immediately before him, they turn to one another and say, slightly bewildered, that his claim implies there is indeed some other god, or else "of whom would he be jealous?"[29]

While they consider this, the voice of Barbēlō calls out to them from the upper realm, leaving a rippling echo on the cosmic waters that separate the Archons' realm from the Fullness. In these ripples, Yaldabaoth and his minions glimpse traces of the perfect human, the One and the upper realm, and so they set to work trying to create the human image that they witnessed.

Instead, once again, the creation is flawed. The Archons say, “Let us make man according to the image of God,” but the only image at their disposal is Yaldabaoth’s.[30] As a result, the Archons create the biblical Adam, the first mortal human, but he is immobile because there is no spirit within him.

Stuck with a seemingly defunct human, the Archons looked to Yaldabaoth for help and asked him to breathe into the motionless body. Yaldabaoth obliged and succeeded in animating Adam, but he did not realize that his breath also carried some of the powers of his mother, Sophia, which in turn possessed some of the powers of Barbēlō and the Father. Due to these divine infusions, Yaldabaoth breathed forth more than just animation - he also produced a trace of divine Life, man’s helper, which took physical manifestation in Eve.[31] Yaldabaoth realized that somehow he had been tricked into letting a glimpse of the divine slip into his realm, and so he chose to enslave Adam, Eve, and their posterity in mortal bodies that would never permit them to have awareness of their divine origins.[32]

The process by which souls are continuously trapped is explained in full: “After the soul leaves the body, she is handed over to the authorities [archons] who have come into being through the archon [Yaldabaoth]. They bind her with chains and throw her into prison [i.e., reincarnation in another body]. They go around with her until she awakens from forgetfulness and acquires knowledge. This is how she attains perfection and is saved.”[33]

One of the mechanisms for enslaving Adam and Eve is to place them under guard in the Garden of Eden. In the Gnostic tradition, unlike the book of Genesis, the Tree of Knowledge is actually a representation of the divine will. It is forbidden to Adam by Yaldabaoth because it is a way for knowledge of the divine realm to penetrate Yaldabaoth’s creation and gift the humans’ minds with an understanding of their true nature.[34]

After Adam and Eve eat from the Tree, they receive the knowledge of their origin and destiny to return to the divine realm but are still expelled from the paradisal garden. In *SBJ*, it is Yaldabaoth who sires Cain and Abel through Eve, and they serve as demonic powers meant to restrain the human body. The rape of Eve (that is how it is presented) is the cause for the introduction of sexual intercourse into the physical world. It was done by Yaldabaoth not so that he might necessarily procreate, but in order to harm the divine

Wisdom that he sees has taken root within her (gifted by the fruit of the tree). Wisdom is saved from harm, however, when Barbēlō sends divine messengers to remove the Wisdom from Eve's body.

Cain and Abel are thus the sons of Yaldabaoth. The third son, Seth, however, is born of Adam and Eve together, and it is Seth who is considered to be the spiritual father of the Gnostics, the one born in the image of "the Son of Man," or the Light.[35] When Yaldabaoth becomes aware of Seth, he realizes there is another threat to his control of the humans and plans his countermoves.

Seth is born in the image of the archetypal divine Seth, one of the principal powers that resides within the Eternity alongside the One. Due to this connection, Seth is representative of the father of all human beings, who are born with the spark of the divine within them.

This section of the narrative concludes with one final trick being played on Adam and Eve: the archons give them draughts of the water of forgetfulness, which causes Adam and Eve and all of those born thereafter to slip into oblivion and lose sight of their origins.[36]

The next passage features a connection to the Genesis flood story. In the text, mysterious beings known only as "sons of God" are said to take human women as their wives and give birth to giants. God decides that this is an evil act and feels regretful of his creation of mankind, which results in him sending a great flood to wipe the earth clean. But taking some pity on the faithful, the Hebrew God in Genesis Chapter 6 chooses to save Noah and his family by commanding him to build an ark and fill it with the beasts of the world.

*SBJ* also features a flood narrative in which a disaster is sent by Yaldabaoth for reasons similar in kind to those of the Hebrew God in Genesis (keep in mind that for the Gnostics, these two deities are one and the same). Yaldabaoth feels that humans are not properly worshipping him and attempts to destroy them for their misdeeds. It is Barbēlō, however, who takes pity on mankind and comes to Noah, giving him instructions to preach the truth to whoever will listen. Although most ignore him, there is a small population, referred to as the "immovable race," that does hear his message and accepts knowledge about the One and Yaldabaoth's infamy.[37]These are the humans who are saved from the flood by a divine cloud, and they survive and attempt

to repopulate the world with those like them who are faithful to their true divine natures. In a twisting of the classic biblical narrative, however, Yaldabaoth sends his angels to the earth to try and mate with these surviving human women. They resist at first, but eventually the archons are able to deceive the women, who mate with the evil angels and cause humanity and its offspring to again lose knowledge of the One.

Finally, the last message to be unveiled in *SBJ* is of the salvation of mankind. The saved people that are referenced in *SBJ* are those referred to as "posterity," usually thought to mean the descendants or those otherwise linked to Seth, or the "immoveable race," meaning those who heard the teachings of Noah before the flood. The Savior describes two active forces within human lives and bodies: the spirit of life that originates with the One and connects humanity to their divine origin, which was mistakenly given to them by Yaldabaoth when he breathed into Adam, and the counterfeit spirit that comes from below, generated by Yaldabaoth and the rulers through the water of forgetfulness and the evil angels sent as messengers.

There are three categories of humanity according to the Savior in *SBJ*.

1. Gnostics – This first group refers to those who have received the spirit of life. They have listened to the teachings and the wisdom of the divines and by achieving gnosis they have become perfect, worthy of transcendent salvation and eternal life. [38]

2. Refusals – This second group consists of those who have heard the secret teachings but reject them, and thus become infused with the counterfeit spirit. They are denied salvation and, when they die, are destined to be placed into new bodies and live out multiple life cycles until they (hopefully) hear the truth and attain salvation.[39]

3. "Those who have turned away" is the final group, and they are described as those who had gained knowledge of the divine spirit but turned away from it willingly. These are considered the lowest humans and are left with no opportunity for redemption. According to the Savior in *SBJ*, these humans are consigned to eternal punishment and will suffer along with Yaldabaoth and the rulers at the end of time.[40]

Thus, in contrast to more mainstream Christian teachings, which focus on conversion being necessary to save ignorant souls from eternal damnation, the Gnostics believe that only apostates are in danger of being punished in the afterlife. If souls die while they are still left in the ignorance of the oblivion, they are allowed the chance to be reborn and again exposed to the truth in another life.

Salvation and damnation in *SBJ* are referred to in terms of "gnosis" and "oblivion," which reflect the Gnostics' focus on knowledge as the key to attaining an eternal reward. The goal is for people to be brought out of oblivion and ignorance by way of exposing them to the teachings of the One and the real nature of the physical world. The divine spirit of Forethought is described as having come twice to humanity (once to Seth and once to those who survived the flood) but having to return to the eternal realm to avoid destruction at the hands of Yaldabaoth. Finally, however, Forethought comes to humanity for a third and final time in the form of a human body that would preach the message of salvation and awakening.[41]

Since *SBJ* identifies Jesus as the Savior, readers are left to assume that Jesus is the human form of Forethought, come one final time to try and save humanity. Through him, humans were called to awaken from their forgetful sleep and, through gnosis, learn about their divine origins and attain salvation. As described in previous passages and discussions on Gnostic scriptures, Jesus taught a secret knowledge that was shrouded in allusion, parable, and mysticism. *SBJ* explains this by telling readers that Forethought, believing this incarnation to be the last chance for saving humanity, and being in danger of harm or destruction by Yaldabaoth and his rulers, speaks in secret teachings so as not to draw the attention of the rulers and their servants. Thus, joining the Gnostics and accepting their interpretations and presentations of Jesus's secret teachings is the path towards salvation. Otherwise, the Gnostics believe, if one listens to Jesus's teachings only on the surface, then they are doomed to be tricked in the way the rulers were meant to be tricked.

Here the mythological narrative breaks off and readers are introduced to an explanation of how this mythology maps onto a more common Christian understanding of the world. The narrator of the story begins to relate a

conversation that he has with the Savior, who is supposedly the one relating all of these details on the nature of the world and the true order of things.

In the actual narrative structure of the *SBJ*, these revelations are taking place after the crucifixion of Jesus. John the Apostle, the supposed narrator and recipient of this revelation, is traveling to Jerusalem when a member of the Pharisees, a Jewish sect that was often depicted biblically as enemies of Jesus, but in actuality simply represented the ruling clerical class, who tries to convince him that Jesus was a deceiver and that John and his friends had been misled and turned away from the truth that his ancestors had known and preached for generations.[42]

John, distraught and now full of questions, is then visited by the Savior, who takes three forms: a child, a young person, and an elderly man. This is not only reminiscent of the later trinitarian view of God that would dominate Catholic and Orthodox teachings, but it also speaks to a very common Gnostic tendency towards a tripartite view of the universe.[43] The mythology that has just been described above takes up a majority of the book and, at the end, John is instructed to write it down and protect the knowledge he has been given.

Unlike many other Jewish and Christian teachings, the *SBJ* is not as much symbolic as it is historical. Much like the Old Testament books of Chronicles, Kings, and others, it proports to teach its readers about the past rather than give insights or prophecies about the future. When compared to texts like the book of Revelation, the messages of salvation are very different and directly related to this chronological focus. In Revelation, readers are implored to hear prophecies about events that will take place in the future and use them to shape their understanding and faith in order to achieve salvation. In *SBJ*, however, salvation comes not from proper orientation towards a coming event, but in properly understanding the nature of the physical world and the forces that created it.[44]

*SBJ* is similar to other revelatory texts in that it chooses to depict the physical world as one that is controlled by evil forces, those who oppress humanity and seek to prevent people from achieving their full spiritual potential. In more traditional texts in the Old Testament and New Testament, these forces work against the faithful by using various methods of violence, coercion, and statecraft to make living a proper lifestyle and expressing

revealed beliefs difficult or even deadly. In *SBJ*, this is done by the evil Archons and the false god Yaldabaoth, who use deceit and withhold knowledge to keep humans in the dark about the universe and their place within it.

The God in *SBJ* is one who is completely removed from humanity and thus cannot truly be known by any physical creature. Instead, humans are left to try and make sense of the lower aspects or manifestations of that God, which come in the form of aeons like Sophia but also in the offspring of Yaldabaoth and his material world. This is what leads to mankind's confusion and frustrated attempts at salvation, because the only mechanism for understanding God has been corrupted by Yaldabaoth.

One of the most interesting and controversial gnostic texts is *The Gospel of Judas*, in which the figure of Judas is portrayed as something of a tragic hero rather than the classic betrayer that later Christian theology has deemed him.

This text opens with an interaction between Jesus and the disciples, whom he tells follow a god that is not his God. Upset by this pronouncement, the disciples ask why Jesus is mocking them. In response, Jesus challenges them to step forth if they "represent the perfect human being," but all of them remain confused and skeptical. It is Judas, however, who steps forth and professes to know that Jesus is a partner of Barbēlō's, but that Judas is not worthy to speak the name of the One who sent Jesus.[45]

This is believed to be intended as a parallel for a biblical passage in which Jesus asks the disciples "Who am I?" Simon Peter replies, correctly, "You are the Christ, Son of the living God." This passage in the Gospel of Judas seemingly establishes Judas as the chief servant much in the same way that Peter's answer was meant to single him out as the strongest believer.[46]

Later in *The Gospel of Judas*, Jesus reveals more of the cosmic order to Judas, including the aeons, the divine Adam, the race of Seth, and other aspects of *SBJ*. In two key ways, however, this gospel is different from *SBJ*. First, there is much less attention paid to the female characters, whether they are divine like Sophia or human like Eve. Furthermore, *The Gospel of Judas* suggests that Yaldabaoth and his servants were brought into existence according to the will of some of the divine beings, in order that he can rule over the chaos of the material world. Despite this, however, the conceit is still maintained that the Old Testament god is inferior. He is a pseudo-divine

being, and the only true God is the One, who lives in the eternal realm separate from humanity and the physical world.[47]

Thus, Judas plays a slightly different role in this text than history traditionally portrays him. His character is tragic, in that he is given knowledge of the divine realm and the truth of the world but deprived of it. Jesus says to him at one point, "I will tell you the mysteries of the kingdom, not so that you will go there, but so that you will be much grieved."[48]

Like in the New Testament gospels, Judas is a critical figure for salvation. In those gospels, salvation comes into the world through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, an action that was facilitated by Judas's betrayal, which itself is an action that Jesus foretold and seemed to require. In the New Testament, Judas gives Jesus over and then suffers and dies for his guilt. Later Christian traditions even depict Judas as suffering the most vile forms of torture in Hell, like in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where he is eternally gnawed in the mouth of Satan. In the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*, however, Jesus implies that he will receive some sort of divine reward for the role he plays in Christ's betrayal and death.

The main message in this gospel is one of divine reorganization: Judas is meant to sacrifice the human being within whom Jesus dwells, not the divine Savior himself. This sets off a chain of events that will ultimately release the physical world from its inferiority and reestablish it as the 13$^{th}$ heaven, with Judas as its supposed ruler.[49]

**Gnostics in History**

"Having knowledge, he does the will of the one who called him, he wishes to be pleasing to him, he receives rest. Each one's name comes to him. He who is to have knowledge in this manner knows where he comes from and where he is going." – Valentinus, *The Gospel of Truth*

The most important historical supporter of Gnosticism as a Christian sect was Valentinus of Rome, a man who not only penned very influential writings but was nearly elected bishop of Rome, which would have forever changed the definition of what Christians now call "Orthodox Christianity." Valentinian Gnosticism was a strain of thought that was very much concerned with being coherent with and accepted by the Church.[50] Some of the Valentinian writings have not been found extant and were only recorded or referred to within other works, many of which are often unsympathetic. Others, such as the Gospel of Truth, survive in full.

Valentinus (ca. 100-175 CE) was born in the Egyptian Delta at Phrebonis, not far from the intellectual capital of the Egyptian kingdom, Alexandria. In fact, it was in Alexandria that he was educated and where he familiarized himself with Greek philosophy, as would have been typical of any learned individual at that time. Bentley Layton suggests that Valentinus's understanding of Platonism came through teachings of Philo Judaeus, a prominent Alexandrian philosopher and allegorist whose life spanned the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE. Philo espoused a popular Hellenistic Jewish interpretation of the Bible, one which Valentinus would adopt and find a great basis for his very philosophical understanding of the Bible.[51]

Valentinus's career as a teacher began in Alexandria around 120 CE, and he must have written a good portion of his work there as well since so many of the surviving fragments were preserved by other scholars who were active in the city. By 140, Valentinus had made his way to Rome, the nerve center of both the world's greatest empire and the growing Christian movement.[52] In Rome, he took on an ecclesiastical role and spread teachings that suggest he must have had a previous knowledge of Gnostic philosophy, or at least mythology, since he features heavily the concepts of a prototypical Adam, salvation through the attainment of knowledge, and a belief that the savior's

role was to liberate humankind from a world that was itself not to be extolled. Referred to as the *Fragments* (since his works survive now only in the form of small parts of presented as references in the writings of other authors), Valentinus's writings feature a great focus on mysticism, far more than other Christian teachers and sects of the time. In fact, his works are even more mystic than the Gnostic myths themselves, which seem to have been his inspiration.

It is thought that Valentinus was the vessel through which the concept of salvation through gnosis was popularized among Gnostic Christian circles, and by whom the connection was made between knowledge, God, and the Savior.[53] As shown in *The Gospel of Truth*, the Valentinian approach is starkly different than the classic Gnostic myth found in the *SBJ*. The most important aspects are the relationship that one can have with the savior as opposed to the story of Yaldabaoth, the hierarchy of the angels, Archons, and powers, and the deep mythology that supposedly undergirds reality. Through the works of Valentinus, then, historians get the best sense of what it would be like for the Gnostic worldview to take root in an intentionally Christian setting.

Valentinus was never actually declared a heretic during his lifetime, despite the way in which his teachings were heavily vilified by later Christian leaders. Indeed, he enjoyed a rather substantial following, as evidenced by the fact that his writings are referenced by such a wide range of other authors, as well as the fact that entire polemical tracts were devoted to disproving and demonizing his teachings, such as Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies*. Valentinus believed that salvation was brought through the Word of God, which unlocked the divine potential within all humans and allowed for an ultimate triumph over the corrupt physical world that was doomed to decay.[54] Christians who gained gnosis through understanding Christ's teachings were able to conquer death and achieve salvation, much like traditional orthodox Christian teachings.

Where Valentinus strayed from traditional thought and drew the ire of others was in the aforementioned adoption of Gnostic mythology and the belief that the physical world was created for an evil purpose. For Valentinus, the physical world was created in ignorance and it breeds ignorance of God

the Father. It is not actually real, he teaches in *The Gospel of Truth*, but consists instead of a sort of fog that has no true substance and only serves to confuse humans and to hide the true universe and the light of the Father.[55]

In his mythology, Jesus is an emissary sent by the Father to enlighten mankind and guide them towards the truth of the universe. Valentinus, instead of using the image of the cross, refers to Jesus as being nailed to a tree, upon which he becomes the fruits of the Father's knowledge. This might be an intentional parallel to the Genesis story of the trees in the garden. If so, then Valentinus is using another common Gnostic trope, which is the fact that the tree of knowledge in the garden is not evil but actually a source of salvation and goodness.[56] Eating from the tree gives knowledge of the Father, who the evil forces of the world are trying to keep hidden, and starts humans on the path to salvation.

From his teachings, a school developed that included many prominent theologians, including Ptolemy, Heracleon, and Theodotus. The school began as simply another strand of normal Christian teaching, hoping to show its followers how to engage with and study the Christian message. By about 300 CE, however, historians think that the Valentinian school had become a completely separate church, likely as Christian groups increasingly became hostile to their theology and it became more unreasonable for them to be part of a cohesive unit.

As Valentinus's work and life make clear, much of what is now known about the Gnostics outside of their surviving texts comes from sources that were decidedly hostile to their teachings and practices. Prominent early Christian writers such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Plotinus, and Epiphanius all referred to contemporary religious groups that they label "gnostics,"[57] although there did not seem to be any concept at the time of a coherent strain of "Gnosticism."

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, was originally from Asia Minor before being appointed bishop in 178. Early in his time in the Rhône valley, he faced a dissemination of Gnostic thinking, which can be attributed in part to a Roman Christian who boasted of his Valentinian training.[58] His resulting study of Gnostic views is what led to the publication of *Against Heresies*, which

functioned as a direct attack on Gnostic theology. Irenaeus rejected the idea that Jesus taught or revealed his message in secret teachings that only a certain, select few could understand or even become exposed to, and he denied the Valentinian way of thinking that believed the apostles and Jesus had access to secret knowledge. He insisted that if they had, then they would surely have shared this knowledge with their successors, the bishops of the church.[59] He argued that, in withholding secret knowledge about the nature of the universe and the path to salvation, the apostles and Jesus would have been lying to Christians, an idea that he found categorically abhorrent.

Irenaeus also used a firmly textual approach to combat the Gnostics, relying on scripture to argue against the validity of their teachings. By singling out and dismissing the Gnostic scriptures as false, Irenaeus actually promoted one of the earliest versions of the Christian canon, in the form of the Old Testament and New Testament that remain ubiquitous today. In this way, the Gnostics may have actually had an indirect hand in the creation of the Bible, which Irenaeus began to formulate (at least in his own mind) as the holy writings that were free from Gnostic contamination. He argued for a reliance on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John because these gospels shared so much with each other and seemed to attest to the same teachings and the same general depiction of the figure of Christ.[60] By relying too much on one single gospel, Irenaeus said of the Gnostics, they misunderstood and misconstrued Jesus’s message by their narrowmindedness.

## Conclusion

The ancient Gnostics will perhaps never cease to be a source of mystery to modern society. Even as scholars piece together the various fragments of their philosophical texts, attempts to figure out what exactly the Gnostics practiced and how they engaged with their Christian contemporaries do not become much easier. In many ways, it seems that circumstances and history have conspired to ensure that the Gnostics remain a nebulous group. At the same time, their own teachings, shrouded in layers of intentional complexity, do not extend access to the casual outsider. Naturally, it's not made any easier by the fact that most of the surviving historical records concerning the Gnostics are polemical treatises by later Church officials who put pen to paper with the express intent of discrediting and perhaps even misrepresenting their subjects.

There is also the possibility that the term "Gnostic" is itself an entirely misleading concept. The term is used by historians and philosophers alike, and it can simultaneously refer to a group of "heretical" Christians in the first few centuries of the Common Era, a distinct group of believers in a mythology that was all their own, or even a misattribution that incorrectly draws connections between wholly distinct groups. Men like Irenaeus could label many distinct groups as "Gnostics" in an attempt to collectively discredit them all.

Given the ongoing mysteries, some continue to ask what happened to the Gnostics, and whether they ever actually existed. The Gnostic myths remain today in such fragmentary form that it is difficult for historians to piece together their purpose or their significance, whereas much of the reason that the world's religious texts are so influential is because they originate from a very specific historical context. The Old Testament, for example, is as much a history of the ancient Israelites as it is a revelation of God's divine word and plan for the world. Similarly, the teachings in the New Testament can be better understood if they are cast in the light of a small sect of believers who are underrepresented and oppressed during the Roman occupation of Judea and thus espouse an understandable message of the holiness of the weak and redemption in a coming world.

The truth is that even with all of the texts that still exist, very little is known about the Gnostics and how they lived. In some respects, the mysterious nature has allowed them to remain so prominent in people's imaginations and recent histories. With a focus on secret teachings, unknown rituals, and an undoubtedly strange but unique and beautiful view of the universe, it is no wonder that the Gnostics continue to captivate audiences generations after they have apparently ceased to exist.

Online Resources

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[4] Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 113.

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[6] David Brakke, *Gnosticism*, 4.

[7] Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 127; Gospel of Truth 16, trans. Harold W. Attridge, in Ehrman.

[8] Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 127.

[9] Gospel of Truth 17.

[10] Gospel of Truth 18.

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[17] Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 58.

[18] David Brakke, *Gnosticism*, 69.

[19] *Secret Book of John*: 2.25.

[20] *SBJ:* 4.19.

[21] Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 123.

[22] Moore and Turner, "Gnosticism," 177.

[23] *SBJ* 6.9-33.

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[25] Moore and Turner, "Gnosticism," 178.

[26] Moore and Turner, “Gnosticism,” 178.

[27] *SBJ* 12.33-13.4.

[28] *SBJ* 13.8; cf. Isaiah 45: 5-6.

[29] *SBJ* 13.12; Moore and Turner, “Gnosticism,” 178.

[30] Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 123; cf. Gen 2:7.

[31] Moore and Turner, *Gnosticism*, 179.

[32] The *SBJ* passage recounting this is particularly poetic, describing the body as the “tomb” of the soul and “the fetter of forgetfulness which is fate.” *SBJ* 22.28.

[33] Moore and Turner, *Gnosticism*,180. *SBJ* 27.

[34] van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 48.

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[37] Brakke, *Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas*, 28.

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

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[42] Brakke, *Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas*, 17.

[43] Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 230.

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[45] Brakke, *Gnosticism: From Nag Hammadi to the Gospel of Judas*, 33.

[46] Matthew 16: 13-20/

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[50] van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 92.

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